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"I know it can be done, that it's important for it to be done, and I want to do it."

These simple but poignant words were written in LIFE Magazine back in 1959. The author captured NASA's mind, body, and soul.

The author was NASA's mind, body, and soul -- Alan Shepard.

Alan dared to dream. He believed in his heart that the NASA family had the talent, courage and focus to do what others said we couldn't. And he wanted to be first.

He -- like all the other astronauts of Mercury 7 -- wanted to lead the way.

But not just in the early days.

Everyone knows about Alan Shepard's historic ride on Freedom 7 and his golf shot during Apollo 14.

He did so much more. He was a fighter who always fought for our nation's space program. He always fought for our future.

I remember one instance in 1993 when the space program was in big trouble in the Congress.

Alan -- always the competitor -- went to work.

He wrote editorials and made phone calls on the upcoming vote. John Glenn can tell you that Members of Congress get a lot of phone calls, many from important people.

When it was Alan Shepard on the line . . . you picked up.

Many people predicted a resounding loss. Many people predicted an end to space exploration for years to come.

But we won that night in 1993 -- by a single vote. And ever since, the margin of victory has increased and the space program has gotten stronger . . . in part, because Alan Shepard knew it could be done . . . that it was important that it be done . . . and he wanted to do it.

Alan was not only a fighter but a visionary. He told me on many occasions about his vision for Mars exploration.

His eyes would light up.

No surprise, he wanted to go. He wanted to be first.

Alan, America **will** go to Mars.

And when we do, it will be because we, like you, knew it could be done . . . that it was important that it be done . . . and we wanted to do it.

Alan knew no other way. That's the way he thought. And now, NASA thinks the same way.

Alan Shepard was our mind.

Before the Mercury 7 were named, not too many people really knew about our space program.

NASA was around . . . but we were really a bunch of nerds.

Talented and hard-working nerds.

But then Alan Shepard and the Mercury 7 came along. They were intense. Determined. Willing.

They gave America's space program a face . . . and they gave our nation what all nations and what all people need -- heroes.

The Mercury 7 were the beginning and Al was the first. At a time when our nation's confidence was down, he had the courage to climb atop that untested Redstone missile and open the space frontier.

He was our mind . . . and our body.

That first trip to space lasted only 15 minutes. But the space Alan Shepard occupies in our history, in our nation's consciousness, in our hearts . . . will last forever.

After all, it's a very high compliment when someone wants to grow up and be like you.

Millions of children wanted to grow up like Alan Shepard.

Older kids like me still do.

Because when he lifted off, he lifted our spirits. He inspired us -- to always explore the unknown and discover what is possible. To always think of the future. To always do our part.

Alan was our soul.

The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote:

Were a star quenched on high,  
For ages would its light,  
Still travelling downward from the sky'  
Shine on our mortal sight.

So when a great man dies,  
For years beyond our ken  
The light he leaves behind him lies  
Upon the paths of men.

Alan Shepard lived to travel toward stars quenched on high. Today, he **is** a star quenched on high. And his spirit shines on.

It shines on Louise and his family.

It shines on our country.

And it shines on a space program that -- whether the Moon . . . Mars . . . or beyond -- promises to live by the words:

"I know it can be done, that it's important for it to be done, and I want to do it."

Alan Shepard -- a brilliant star in the heavens -- will forever shine as . . . NASA's mind, body and soul.

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